

Moral Talent and Security: Diachronic Perspectives on Chinese Strategic Culture

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Since the end of the Cold War, China has undergone a remarkable transformation. Reaping the fruits of the diplomatic opening and economic reforms of the 1970s and '80s, it has grown steadily from an isolated and economically stunted state of little import for those without a regional interest in East Asia into a significant economic and military power just beginning to wield its influence across the globe. As policymakers and international relations (IR) pundits have turned their attention to the dark horse flexing its newly (re)gained power, their primary concern is forecasting China's actions in international society. Their analyses and prognostications often display a certain subtle but tangible anxiety arising from the fact that nobody is certain how to understand China's intentions (see for example Manning & Przystup 2016, Revere 2016 and Shi 2015).

In trying to make sense of the the East Asian giant's behavior, academics often turn to culture as our main explanatory tool. Culture shows promise because it is "fitted" to the contours of the puzzling case, showing how the mass of contradictions that we perceive in China's behavior actually make sense within the state's unique cultural climate. The turn to culture answers some of the "how possible" questions of foreign policy decision-making, giving us a prepackaged variable to which we can ascribe puzzling foreign policy choices. In China's case, culture is typically invoked in the form of Confucianism, a system of social and political thought that focuses on morality and appropriate conduct as the ordering principle of a stable and prosperous society.

Unfortunately, when dealing with Chinese culture as an explanation for Chinese behavior, it is difficult to escape binary thinking about key aspects of Chinese culture like Confucian political thought. Some scholars like Morris Rossabi (1983), Scott Boorman (1969), and Paul Godwin (1984) highlight the quintessentially Confucian characteristics of

Chinese foreign policy. These arguments focus primarily or exclusively on defensive behaviors and the restricted use of military force at various points in Chinese history, which they attribute to a Confucian belief system essential to Chinese culture. Other scholars like Denny Roy (1994, 1996), Allen Whiting (1983), and Deng Yong & Wang Fei-Ling (2004) emphasize the assertive nature of Chinese strategic action on the contemporary world stage. Where they address Confucianism at all, they do so in the negative, citing the Communist Revolution in the early 20th century as the end of Confucianism's influence on Chinese foreign policy.

Even scholars like Alastair Iain Johnston, who are conscious of the binary and strive to work against it, struggle to escape the all-or-nothing approach to Confucianism in Chinese foreign policy. As he turns to the Ming Dynasty strategic canon to make a more systematic review of culture's influence on Chinese strategic choice, Johnston identifies both Confucian and *realpolitik* elements in the security discourse. However, although he notes that both exist, he dismisses the Confucian elements as merely symbolic and thus insignificant in a larger theoretical context. By minimizing the importance of Confucian symbolic vocabulary, he paints a picture of Chinese behavior as monochromatically realist, largely perpetuating the binary.

Chinese scholar Liu Tiewa is the one scholar I have found that escapes the trap of cultural reductionism. Unlike Johnston, she does not exclude the symbolic out of hand. This allows her to tell a compelling story of subtle variation as she traces the development of Chinese political thought from the end of the imperial through Deng Xiaoping's rule. She highlights how Chinese strategic combines a range of concepts drawn from both traditional Chinese and Western sources. In her depiction of China's culture of national security,

Confucian thought is neither the single most defining feature of Chinese strategic culture nor an unimportant symbolic element that can be dismissed. She uses this subtler picture of dynamism to explain China's vacillation between assertiveness and withdrawal on the international stage.

Liu's astute observations give scholars tools for puzzling out the mystery of China's intentions without depicting Chinese culture as monolithically Confucian or Realist. This nuanced view is vital both for assessing the global security implications of China's rise and for cleansing our theories of the trace of Orientalism and Red Scare ideology that plague many monolithic conceptions of Chinese culture. However, while Liu's work is empirically ingenious, it lacks a satisfying grounding in theory. This lack of a theoretical foundation makes it difficult to apply Liu's reasoning the particularities of 20th century China that she explicitly addresses. This limits the usefulness of her argument in making sense of politics moving into the future. In this paper, I take the nuance and dynamism in China's strategic thought over time that Liu describes and provide a foundation for it by rooting it in a discursive theory of strategic culture.

Following Lisa Wedeen's (2002) lead in conceiving of culture as "semiotic practices," I define strategic culture as a system of signification and the associated practices of meaning-making connected with a society or state's security, foreign policy, and grand strategy. Most previous work on strategic culture like Johnston's has characterized culture as internalized preferences and causal beliefs about the nature of international politics. Johnston takes for granted that these preferences and beliefs exist in the world and misses how the causal relationships themselves are symbolically constituted and imbued with meaning. This further enables a one-dimensional or monolithic view of that culture because no mechanism

of change is presented. By conceptualizing strategic culture as the semiotic practices of security, I open the door to more subtlety and dynamism.

Security meaning-making practices are performed discursively as the society's various members discuss security, strategy, and foreign policy with each other. These strategic discourses consist of two types of content. First is the causal content that the strategic culture literature has traditionally focused on. This relates concepts such as specific actors and policy actions to each other in a web of cause and effect that can be used to evaluate the efficacy of a given policy option. However, Wedeen's theory of culture points to another aspect of these semiotic practices that the literature largely ignores, namely the constitutive content. This content defines the boundaries and characteristics of the concepts in the causal web. I will argue that both aspects of security meaning-making are important for understanding the way a society's culture plays into its foreign policy.

In order to capture both these components of strategic cultural discourse, I turn to a technique called predicate analysis (see Milliken 1999), which uses the syntactic structure universal to natural languages to map the contours of concepts as they relate to one another. Whereas Johnston's method of cognitive mapping focuses on the causal linkages between concepts whose connotations are assumed to be self-evident, predicate analysis dissects the referenced concepts' meanings. I apply this technique to the strategic cultural discourses under Deng Xiaoping and Mao Zedong, using the juxtaposition to illustrate the shifts that Liu identifies in her study. I then focus in particular on the changing appearance and significance of one particular concept: the moral man in politics. The anatomy of this particular element underlines Confucianism's ambiguous role and calls into question the validity of monolithic models of Chinese strategic culture by highlighting its capacity for and history of marked

changes over time. This necessitates a more nuanced reflection on Confucianism's role in China's foreign policy today.

Apart from validating Liu Tiewa's observations about 20th century Chinese strategic culture, the theory of strategic culture developed here sheds light on contemporary and future Chinese foreign policy. The predicate analysis methodology need not only be applied to historical texts but can also be used to analyze ongoing security discourse in China. This allows us to actually observe the shifts in strategic culture as they occur. By monitoring changes in China's security discourse as they unfold, scholars and policy pundits can glean an immediately relevant understanding of the strategic priorities and limits of possibility in China's discourse of national security. This may not be able to answer Johnston's narrower question of predicting Chinese strategic action, but it can speak to the political motivation of the paper in that it helps us understand China's rise.

Strategic Culture & China

Strategic culture emerged out of the post-War literature on cognitive psychology and operational codes pioneered by the likes of Nathan Leites (1951). With its roots planted firmly in the apprehension surrounding the Cold War nuclear standoff, the strategic culture literature was focused on the realm of political possibility from the outset. Its development was less concerned with what states like the USSR *would* do than with what they *could* do. Ideas of rationality got theorists and policymakers part of the way, but there was a persistent concern that some modes of behavior lay outside the boundaries of rational choice theories. Strategic culture aimed to patch up the gaps where rationality failed.

Since its initial formulation, the concept of strategic culture has developed into a robust and variegated sector of scholarship. John Glenn presents a helpful categorization of the literature (2009), which he groups into four main schools of thought: epiphenomenal, constructivist, poststructuralist, and interpretivist. Each of these approaches draws on a different constellation of literatures, defining strategic culture differently and applying it to a variety of empirical cases. The full range of the literature extends beyond the scope of this paper, so here I will focus on the two major works that apply strategic culture to the case of China, both of which operate within the conventional constructivist vein¹.

Alastair Iain Johnston's work from the mid-1990s is the most famous examination of Chinese strategic culture. In his 1995 book, Johnston starts with a definition of strategic culture inspired by Clifford Geertz's work on religious culture:

"Strategic culture is an integrated system of symbols (i.e., argumentation structures, languages, analogies, metaphors, etc.) that acts to establish pervasive and long-lasting grand strategic preferences by formulating concepts of the role and efficacy of military force in interstate political affairs, and by clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the strategic preferences seem uniquely realistic and efficacious." (36)

Although this definition is helpful conceptually, it is not immediately obvious how to implement it analytically. Johnston goes on to specify that strategic culture operates as "a consistent set of ranked preferences that persist across time and across strategic contexts." (1995, 52-54). So while Johnston's ontology of strategic culture includes symbolic content, his implementation of it is not unlike the preference rankings of game theory and formal modelling.

¹ For other examples of constructivist approaches to strategic culture see Barnett (1996), Berger (1996), and Katzenstein (1996a).

Johnston's understanding of strategic culture as enduring preference rankings makes it reasonable to dig back into history to find the roots these preferences. So for his empirical analysis, Johnston turns to China's Ming Dynasty (ca. 1368-1644 CE). He uses the texts of the Seven Military Classics, written over a span of fourteen centuries (from the *Sun Zi Bing Fa*, ca. 500 BCE, to the *Tang Tai Zong Li Wei Gong Wen Dui*, ca. 900 CE), as his objects of analysis. These texts constituted the canon of military thought that government officials would have been expected to familiarize themselves with as a prerequisite of high office. To analyze the texts, Johnston uses a method called cognitive mapping, which draws a diagram of all causal statements in the text (explicit and implied). These statements link policy actions to outcomes, displaying what the author viewed as the most desired outcomes and the best ways of attaining those outcomes. That is, a preference ranking.

The core insight of Johnston's multifaceted study is that China displayed a dual-track strategic culture under the Ming Dynasty. The core of this strategic culture is what Johnston dubs the *parabellum* paradigm. This mode of strategic thought is characterized by an inherently oppositional and zero-sum view of interstate security and a preference for offensive tactics. In addition to the *parabellum* paradigm, Johnston identifies a mode of thought inspired by Confucian ideologies that overlays the cultural realist logic. This track is characterized by restraint and a preference for defensive tactics. Although Johnston acknowledges that both patterns of thought are present in the discursive milieu of the Ming Dynasty, he dismisses the Confucian paradigm as symbolic and thus irrelevant for explaining strategic behavior—a puzzling move, given his initial, Geertz-inspired definition of strategic culture.

In his 1996 article, Johnston extends his approach to examine Chinese strategic culture under Mao. Applying his cognitive mapping methodology to Mao's writings on military strategy, he identifies similar oppositional, zero-sum logic in Mao's thinking. Since he is primarily concerned with verifying the *parabellum* paradigm's persistence, he does not devote much time to the other track but does note that the Confucian paradigm does not seem to be represented in Mao's thought. Johnston takes this as confirmation both that the parabellum paradigm represents the core of Chinese strategic culture and that that core is durable across even the most dramatic of regime shifts.

Much more recently, Liu Tiewa has again taken up the study of Chinese strategic culture. In her 2014 article, she critiques Johnston's separation of the symbolic from his conception of operational strategic culture. She argues that this is an artificial decomposition and unfounded based on Johnston's own definition of strategic culture that rides on the symbolic. Instead she argues for what she calls an integrated conception of strategic culture that fuses the symbolic with the operational. She argues that taking an integrated approach will reveal significant complexities that are lost otherwise.

Turning to the case of China, Liu moves through the developments of the twentieth century and the accompanying changes in Chinese strategic culture, emphasizing the composite nature of Chinese strategic thought. She identifies the initial influences from both Confucian and Daoist political philosophy and then goes on to show the incorporation of perspectives from Marxist thought under Mao. Moving beyond the ground covered by Johnston, Liu identifies elements under Deng and Hu that were drawn from the Western Liberal tradition. Using select case studies from the Korean, Vietnam, and Iraq Wars, she

shows these various conceptual elements in play as Chinese officials formulate their foreign policies.

Liu makes a compelling critique that Johnston's work on strategic culture does not implement an integrated definition, and she shows the more variegated reality of Chinese strategic thought that comes to light with the adoption of an integrated view very effectively. This nuance allows her to reconcile seemingly contradictory instances of Chinese strategic behavior that Johnston glosses over. However, strategic culture in her usage is very vaguely defined. In fact, nowhere does she define the concept explicitly, and the theoretical grounding of her analysis suffers from this omission. In reintroducing the symbolic to the study of strategic culture, she treats it as practically synonymous with political philosophy. But she fails to provide a mechanism by which the philosophy and beliefs interface with the policymaking process. This leaves us with the message that the symbolic content matters and an understanding of the complexity we lose by ignoring it but little to no comprehension of why this is so or how to proceed with our study of it in the future.

Integrated Strategic Culture

Taking up Liu Tiewa's call for an integrated approach to strategic culture, in this section I outline a theoretically grounded conception of strategic culture that integrates the symbolic with the operational. Symbols are important factors in imbuing the political with meaning and significance, and excluding symbolic discourses unnecessarily hampers a theory's ability to explain the constitution and significance of strategic action. In the interest of anchoring the symbolic in the concrete, this theory also provides a model of how strategic

cultural symbols delineate the boundaries of the politically possible, as well as a process allowing that constitutive relationship to change over time.

Strategic Culture as Meaning-Making

Developing such an inclusive ontology of strategic culture requires an examination of symbols and their place in cultural processes. In the context of culture, a symbol can be defined as an object (whether physical or ideational) which does not bear meaning in and of itself but which is tied to an abstract meaning by intersubjective understanding. The symbol presents and embodies what it signifies such that invoking the signifier calls up that which it signifies. Human life is saturated with symbols. They can be physical objects or images (e.g. flags, religious icons, wedding bands), events (e.g. 9/11 in the American consciousness or the 1948 Nakba in the Palestinian consciousness), or even linguistic signs (e.g. letters, words, and even metaphors).

In thinking about symbols' role in culture then, it is helpful to conceive of culture as meaning-making, or as Lisa Wedeen (2002) puts it, "semiotic practices." If symbols are the vehicles of social meaning, then culture is the means by which that social meaning is enacted or deployed. A society's culture consists of the shared practices by which members of the society make sense of the the world around them and their actions in it. Wedeen uses the example of an individual sowing seeds. Even without symbols, the observer can assess the causes and effects at play. But surface-level observation cannot determine the meaning the act has for the participant or their audience. Is it a game? Is it a solemn religious ceremony? Is it an act of military or supernatural defense?

This indeterminacy of significance despite clear material conditions points to the two components of cultural systems. First is the causal content. This is the information the outsider can glean from merely observing the act. In the seed example, the observer can say the participant is planting crops. The action of throwing seeds into freshly tilled earth has material consequences. In a linguistic example such as the utterance, “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire,” this causal content would be the if-then statement connecting smoke and fire in an implied causal relationship. These relationships, if they are not objective, are at least within the grasp of the observer’s subjectivity.

But the cultural system also contains a set of constitutive content which is not immediately apprehensible through outsider observation. This is the significance(s) that the act has for the participants and their audience. In Wedeen’s seed example this would be the web of association connected to planting crops: collective memories of planting seasons, religious and intellectual discussion of agriculture, etc. In the linguistic example this would be the pragmatic connotation of commenting on someone’s assumed culpability. This information is context contingent and often communicated verbally.

If both these forms of social information are integral to an understanding of culture, then we can define strategic culture as the vocabulary of symbols, the meanings they carry, and the semiotic practices that deploy them in the context of national security. In this view, strategic culture includes not only the relationships between policy actions and objects, but also the significance of those actions and objects in the minds of the participants and audience. The participants here are all parties who participate in a society’s foreign policy discourse. This includes the policymakers typically focused on in the strategic culture literature but also non-governmental actors like journalists and policy analysis. Provided

there is some form of discursive communication between these parties and those enacting policy choices, their actions contribute to the performance of national security and thus fall within the purview of strategic culture.

This definition of strategic culture allows the observer to reincorporate symbolic discourses into their analysis. Although not observable from a surface-level observation of security practices, they are still indispensable parts of those practices because they convey the intersubjective significance of the actions. Without understanding the significance of an action, the observer cannot fully understand the intentionality backing up that action. An agent's goal is implicated in her actions because they are embedded in a cultural web of semiotic associations. More than just material cause and effect, semiotic content shows the meanings the cause and effect bear. Significance shows not only what the actor did, but what she was *trying* to do. So without the inclusion of the symbolic, the entire enterprise of strategic cultural studies, which aims to illuminate states' intentions, is futile.

Symbols & the Boundaries of Possibility

The importance of signification for intentionality applies not only for the external observer of security processes but also for the individuals participating in them. Foreign policy and the performance of national security is an inherently communicative process. In order to take any action, policymakers are forced to communicate with each other and with their audiences. The policymakers need to justify their actions to those they are accountable to: the general populace, the military leaders, and/or the wealthy stakeholders, depending on the national context.

This justification uses the symbolic vocabulary of strategic culture as its medium. Making foreign policy actions intelligible requires referencing meanings that the audience understands and relates to. Although the justification can be a separate action or event, it is often rolled into the same discursive act that enacts the decision. George W. Bush's 2001 speech declaring military action in Afghanistan can act as an example. The language of the speech—the very language that performs the action of declaring war—also gives that action meaning. Bush connects concepts of 'freedom' and 'American prosperity' to the newly coalescing object of 'September 11th,' assembling their significances to render his declaration of war meaningful.

Relying on symbolic vocabulary to communicate policy actions places an important constraint on foreign policy. To be sensible, a symbol must exist in both the speaker and the listener's consciousness. At example at the linguistic level would be a sequence of sounds, say *dim*. This sequence of sounds carries the meaning of a lack of luminescence to the speaker of English, but the same sequence means a point or spot to the Cantonese speaker. For the invocation of the sign *dim* to be effective, there must be a shared understanding of its meaning. At the political level, we can look at the instance of events like 9/11. Such a date only has significance salient to justifying invasion if there is a shared understanding of the terrorist attacks that occurred and their psychological impact. Although this particular meaning is widely shared, a hypothetical audience unfamiliar with the attacks would not find that symbol compelling.

This requirement of salience places an important constraint on political actors. Their actions must be justified using a flexible but defined set of symbols. Following this logic, policymakers cannot under normal circumstances take an action that cannot be linked to a

shared unit of meaning. If there is no cultural touchstone for an action, it is off the table of normal politics, even if the policymakers can conceive of it as viable strategy amongst themselves. This means that the contours of strategic culture define the set of socially viable foreign policy strategies that officials have to choose from.

Moving beyond the communication between elites and their audiences, there is still another, deeper constraint that strategic culture places on the policy process. Policymakers consider all the options on the table, but what they even see as options are culturally and linguistically contingent at a very fundamental level. This draws from a theory associated with 20th century linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf, aptly named the Whorfian hypothesis²: that language itself structures our cognition. This hypothesis, which challenged the conventional understanding that cognition exists prior to and independent from the language used to communicate it, has since been born out in numerous experimental and observational studies (see for example Boroditsky 2001). The reasoning is that language allows use to parse and categorize the world and by its labels and symbols we are able to construct a mental map of ourselves and our environment.

If this cognitive structuring holds true down to phenomena as fundamental as color perception (see Kay & Regier 2006), then it stands to reason that it should hold for higher order symbolic systems like strategic culture. Imagine a hypothetical society that has no shared symbolic representation of the act of compromise. There are no stories recounting past compromises and no visual representation of it. There may not even be a lexical item that carries the meaning. In such a society, policy leaders would be hard-pressed to consider

² The Whorfian hypothesis has attracted some criticism on the grounds that many of its applications tend towards treating language as the sole determinant of behavior. However, the original hypothesis, which I have used here, does not make these deterministic claims.

it as an option. It does not exist as a separate category of action in their mind. It is not a case of considering and rejecting the option. The option does not even enter their field of cognition. The symbol is not only necessary for communicating action but also for conceiving of it as possible.

These insights from linguistic scholarship on symbolic systems of communication show that adopting an integrated view of strategic culture that reincorporates the symbolic need not divorce the concept from the realities of making policy. Indeed, if anything, viewing strategic culture as a semiotic system places it at the core of strategic practices. This system defines the boundaries of the communicable and even the conceivable. By understanding the contours of a society's strategic culture, the outside observer can understand the realm of political possibility within which they operate. Contrary to Johnston's assumption, the symbolic discourses are not irrelevant to the formulation and implementation of policy. They make it possible and as such constitute the preconditions of the causal beliefs that Johnston bases his work on.

Integration and Diachrony

Although this integrated view brings the symbolic back into the study of strategic culture, it does not self-evidently allow for changes like the ones that Liu observes in Chinese strategic culture over the course of the 20th century. Someone could still conceivably make a primordialist argument using an integrated view by assuming a constancy of the symbolic relationships. After all, the reasoning might go, symbols must have shared meanings to be

intelligible, and using a symbol outside of its agreed-upon meaning renders it nonsensical. How then could the system of symbols ever change?

The key for addressing this argument comes from a closer examination of the nature of these signs that make up strategic culture. Drawing again from linguistic conceptions of semiotics, a sign consists of two parts: the *signifier* and the *signified*. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is fundamentally arbitrary. The signifier does not bear any inherent connection to the signified. Nothing about the word 'red' must necessarily refer to the color of light with a wavelength between 620 and 750 nanometers. The signifier and signified are connected by common consensus. Put succinctly, the sign does not have to be so; it is so because we make it so.

Because significance is contingent on common usage, it can and does change as the patterns of its usage change. To be clear, this does not negate my previous assertion that intelligibility depends on conforming to norm of usage. Blatant re-appropriation of a sign's meaning is still nonsensical from a communicative perspective. Invoking the sign 'fish' to references a rabbit will a few eyebrows and evoke a few laughs. Unless, context makes the speaker's meaning clear (for example, by point to the rabbit in question), the communication will not be effective. But incremental shifts that accumulate into large shifts are possible. Take the semantic development of the English word 'silly.' In its Anglo-Saxon incarnation as *sellic* it carried the meaning of today's word 'blessed.' Through the shift to Middle English, however, it's meaning was broadened beyond religious contexts to include references to children. Then as Middle English morphed into Modern English, the original religious contexts were excluded from the word's meaning. Each of these moves was within the range

of intelligibility for the speakers at the time, but in sum they shifted the role of the sign substantially.

Both types of incremental shifts can happen in higher-order symbolic systems as well. For an example of a broadening move, take the shifting meaning of 'security.' Historically, the invocation of the signifier 'security' has been connected to safety from material, specifically military threats. However, as the modern nation-state has developed, and especially in the last century, numerous other concerns have been brought under the umbrella of 'security.' Ole Wæver calls this 'securitization,' the process of grouping issues into the semantic field of security (Wæver 1993)³.

There are other, less well-studied processes of excluding concepts from a given sign's semantic field. An ongoing example in North American security discourse is the the signifier 'terrorism.' In the 21st century American (especially White American) consciousness, the concept of terrorism has become deeply entangled with the idea of Islam. This has come about through an accumulation of speech acts, and while it is not a universal association, it is common enough to be widely understood. However, in recent years, there has been a conscious move on the part of American Muslims and their allies to move mainstream Islam out from under terrorism's umbrella. Motivated by a desire to counteract Islamophobia, this discursive move redraws the boundaries of the sign 'terrorism.'

A deepened understanding of signs' mutability adds a new dimension to the study of semiotic systems. In his seminal *Course in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure

³ Scholars have examined the rhetorical securitization of various sectors of politics and the concrete implications that that discursive move has on security practices. See for example Elbe (2006) on HIV/AIDS, Trombetta (2008) on environmental security, and Léonard (2010) on the securitization of migration.

describes what he calls a “radical duality” between an “axis of simultaneities” and an “axis of successions” (de Saussure 1916; p. 79). Endemic to all systems of values—systems which equate things of different orders—in the context of semiotic systems, this divergence describes the differences between how symbols operate at a given time (the synchronic) from how their operation operates through time (diachronic). Although synchrony and diachrony call for different modes of analysis, because they are dimensions of the same phenomenon, they are intertwined with one another. Strategic culture cannot be studied as a system of meaning-making without acknowledging both.

By combining synchronic and diachronic perspectives, the question of strategic culture’s durability, which Johnston assumes and Liu refutes, begins to resolve itself. Along the synchronic dimension is the contingent but intersubjectively held relationship between strategic symbols and what they signify. Along the diachronic dimension are the processes by which that relationship is reshaped. Fusing them gives us a picture of strategic culture as what I would term ‘plastically durable.’ These systems of significance can and do change substantially, but that change is beyond the power of a single actor to effect. It requires a shift in the whole collective’s understanding. So we begin to see strategic culture as something which, while it does not stretch back unchanged into pre-modern times, does not change with every turn of the social currents either.

Taking a view of strategic culture as a semiotic system and its accompanying practices of meaning-making allows us to answer Liu’s call to reincorporate symbolic discourses as a central part of strategic culture. This revitalized symbolic phenomenon is not politically toothless as Johnston treats it. It mediates what policymakers can realistically enact and communicate and even delineates what they can imagine politically. Critically, this system of

signification can shift over time—not capriciously, but gradually and enough that over time there emerge substantial differences. These synchronic and diachronic insights make untenable the view that strategic culture endures immutably as a set of preference rankings. This opens the door theoretically to Liu’s argument that China’s strategic culture draws on many different sources, morphing significantly over the 20th century and thus cannot be understood in simplistic terms of stable monolithic paradigms of Confucianism or *realpolitik* as Johnston and others approach it.

Studying Integrated Strategic Culture

Deploying an integrated conception of strategic culture and using it to understand specific cases like China requires the development of a new methodology. The empirics of Liu Tiewa’s study are convincing but unsystematic. There is no consistent object of analysis or methodology for dissecting the selected objects. Her work is helpful for critiquing existing assumptions about strategic culture, but its usefulness for application beyond Liu’s empirical scope is limited. On the other side, Johnston’s method is systematic but insufficient. His technique of cognitive mapping only shows how concepts in a text are related to each other causally. It does not give any insight into what those concepts mean. The study of strategic culture as a system of meaning-making calls for a methodology that is both systematic and able to capture the semantic fields of objects, not just their effects on one another.

For my work here, I utilize a discursive approach called *predicate analysis* as outlined by Jennifer Milliken (1999). Predicate analysis takes advantage of a grammatical feature shared across languages: the subject-predicate statement structure. The template of a

linguistic proposition consists of a subject—an entity that the proposition concerns—and a predicate—a property ascribed to the subject. In a simple proposition such as “China is a large country,” the property of ‘being a large country’ is assigned to the subject ‘China,’ constituting the set of meanings attached to the word ‘China’ as it is used in that particular context. Understanding this semantic relationship allows the analyst to mine a text for insight into the full range of notions involved in a given strategic symbol, showing what meanings are implicated when the symbol is invoked.

Predicates attached to one subject can also make reference to another. For example, in the proposition “Japan is occupying China,” the primary subject is ‘Japan,’ which is described as occupying China. But this statement also provides information about the semantic field of ‘China’ because it frames China as being occupied by Japan. In this case, although ‘China’ occupies a position as a grammatical object, in a discursive sense it is still a subject, because the proposition conveys information to define its semantic field. This feature of juxtaposing multiple subjects in a single proposition allows the analyst to draw connections between the various subjects described in a text. ‘Japan’ and ‘China’ are defined in relation to each other.

A complete predicate analysis of a text yields a concept map that describes the contours of the subjects and their relationships with each other. Each node represents a different subject, whose significance is described in terms of the predicates attached to it. Lines connect these nodes describing the relationships between them. This improves on the cognitive mapping methodology that Johnston uses because it captures both causality and constitution. In fact, it hints that the distinction between the two may be overstated, since

the causal relationships between subjects are part of the same predicates that constitute the individual subjects.

If these concept maps derived from predicate analysis give us a synchronic picture of a state's strategic cultural discourse, then we can use maps from different points in time to assess diachronic changes in strategic culture. These changes can be grouped under two aspects. First, a given symbol may become associated with different meanings over time as in the case of securitization discussed above. Second, a given concept may be associated different signifiers over time. An example of this, which will be discussed in detail in the next section, is the concept of socialization into an ethical/moral system, which is referred to by different terms throughout Chinese history.

Because this approach to strategic culture conceives of language and its usage as the factors constraining policy, it can be applied to analyze any piece of discourse on security and strategy. Insider records of the policymaking process are not necessarily privileged over public statements about foreign policy as they are when using cognitive mapping, because both are part of the same ideational milieu. Neither should present a view of strategic thought that is contradictory to the other's portrayal. However, because different sectors of the strategic discursive environment will have different emphases, for diachronic analyses it is important to analyze similar cross sections for each time period.

Application: Deng Xiaoping's Strategic Culture

By way of illustration, I apply this predicate analysis technique here to analyze the Chinese strategic culture under the administration of Deng Xiaoping from 1978 to 1992.

Over the course of his tenure, Deng gave five major addresses that touched on matters of national security and military strategy. In chronological order, these are: (1) “Speech at a Plenary Meeting of the Central Military Committee” 《在中央军委全体会议上的讲话》 on December 28, 1977; (2) “Realize the Four Modernizations and Never Seek Hegemony” 《实现四化，永不称霸》 on May 7, 1978; (3) “Streamline the Army and Raise its Combat Effectiveness” 《精简军队，提高战斗力》 on March 12, 1980; (4) “Build Powerful, Modern, and Regularized Revolutionary Armed Forces” 《建设强大的现代化正规化的革命军队》 on September 19, 1981; and (5) “Speech at a Forum of the Central Military Committee” 《在军委座谈会上的讲话》 on July 4, 1982. The combined full text of the speeches totals about 17,000 characters in length⁴.

[Figure 1: Schematic Representation of Dengist Strategic Culture]

A full dissection of the symbols and semiotic practices displayed in these texts could fill an entire book, but I would like to touch on two main themes visible from this overview of Deng’s strategic culture. First, in Deng’s conception of the fundamental nature of international politics, we see an interesting mix of Johnston’s and Liu’s arguments. Deng does speak of cooperation and solidarity; which Liu picks up on in her argument that Deng draws from Western traditions of Liberalism. However, this solidarity is only presented by Deng as a possibility between states with already compatible interests (determined by their position

⁴ Many thanks to the staff at the National Library of China in Beijing for their assistance in locating and digitizing the full texts of these speeches.

in global structures of exploitation). In this we see a reflection of Johnston's argument that a view of politics as zero-sum runs throughout Chinese history.

Second, from this overview we can gain some insight into the Deng administration's preferred mode of operation in foreign policy matters. Deng frames national security as depending on three pillars: economic development, the development of modernized armed forces, and the rallying of public support. All three of these pillars are articulated as defensive measures. The goal in modernizing the army is to better enable it to anticipate and defend against attacks from the main adversaries (the USA and USSR in Deng's eyes). This contributes to an overall defensive orientation that permeates Deng's strategic culture. Force is to be used primarily (perhaps exclusively) as a mode of defending China from external threats, not as a way of proactively furthering Chinese interests. This insight from a constitutive examination of Chinese strategic culture contrasts with the image of a more offensively oriented China suggested by Johnston on the basis of the causal beliefs he identifies.

Cultivating Talent and Benevolence

Here I would like to focus on the anatomy of a specific symbol that appears in Chinese strategic culture under Deng: *rencai* (人才). Typically translated into English as 'talent,' this concept does not at first appear to have much more significance than technical capability and political knowledge. According to this reading of the term, Deng's concern with cultivating talent seems to be primarily one of human resource development.

However, if we read his writings with an eye towards sketching out the semantic boundaries of the term, we see it has more depth than the gloss of ‘talent’ would suggest. For example, in his July 4, 1982 “Speech at a Forum of the Military Commission of the Central Committee of the CPC” (Chinese: 《在军委座谈会上的讲话》), Deng Xiaoping relates a brief anecdote, which I have translated below:

“The year before last, I went with Comrade Chen Pixian to the No. 2 Automobile Factory. There was an assistant director there who accompanied us and showed us around the factory. He made a great impression on me. What do I mean by that? In such a large automobile factory, he was the technical backbone of the operation, very competent in his work. By this I mean to describe his capability. At that time, he was 38 years old; now he is 40. More importantly, he was attacked during the “Cultural Revolution.” He was one who opposed the beating, the smashing, the looting. Since then he has been a picture of good character, including his attitude towards the problems in our so-called “Oppose Rightist Trends of Overturning Correct Verdicts” campaign. This kind of *rencai* is particularly heartening. There is no lack of this sort of person, and it is easy to distinguish them. In making promotions, these sorts of political qualifications should be our first priority.”

Deng Xiaoping uses this anecdote as an illustration of what he means when he calls for the Chinese armed forces to focus on cultivating and identifying *rencai*. From it we can glean that *rencai* encompasses two main components. One is the technical ability that the gloss ‘talent’ refers to intuitively. This is what Deng refers to as ‘capability’ or *nengli* (能力). The second component, which Deng ranks as more important, is moral uprightness or good character. Deng refers to this attribute when he says the assistant director is “a picture of good character” or *biaoxian haode* (表现好的). Both these technical and moral capabilities are subsumed under the domain of the word *rencai*.

If we examine this deepened understanding of *rencai*'s conceptual boundaries in light of Deng Xiaoping's strategic culture in general (see Fig. 1), we can see the role it plays in his conception of national security. Cultivating *rencai* is one of the four immediately actionable policies that will benefit Chinese national security. He sees it as directly contributing to the army's ability to mobilize effectively for combat. This in turn is an important factor in the military modernization efforts that Deng championed. In his view, China's national security depended direction on having a modernized army. So there is a causal chain linking the cultivation of moral talent to military strength, greater security from international threats, and ultimately enhanced national prosperity.

This reading of *rencai* and its context bears a striking resemblance to the political writings of Mencius. Also known as Mengzi, Mencius (ca. 372 – 289 BCE) was one of the most prominent Confucian thinkers of ancient China. His expositions on Confucius' teachings formed a key part of the corpus which all Imperial-era officials were expected to memorize in order to advance in civil service. One concept in particular stands out as salient to the discussion of the moral man in politics: *renzheng* (仁政). Typically translated as 'benevolent governance,' this term refers to the political application of *ren*, an important part of the Confucian moral complex, closely connected to the idea of righteousness or *yi* (義). It too can be illustrated with an anecdote from Mencius' writings.

"King Hui of Liang said, 'As you, Sir, know, among the states under heaven, none was stronger than my own state of Jin. But by the time it came down to me, we were defeated by Qi in the east, and my eldest sons died from that defeat. We lost 700 li of land to the Qin in the west. We were dishonored by Chu in the south. I am deeply ashamed of these things and I wish for the sake of the dead to wash away this shame once and for all. What should I do?'

Mencius answered him saying, 'One can have a territory of but 100 li on each side and still rule as a true king. My king, if you put in place benevolent governance of the people, use punishment sparingly, collect only light taxes, allowing the people to plough deeply and weed without difficulty, and if the strong men would use their spare time to cultivate filial piety, brotherly love, loyalty, and trustworthiness such that they would serve their fathers and brothers at home and be good servants to their elders and princes outside the home, then they can be called upon to make cudgels and clubs which they would use to overcome the strong armor and sharp weapons of Qin and Chu. Those others rulers take their people away from their time for farming, making them unable to cultivate in order to support their parents. Their parents thus freeze and starve; their brothers, wives, and children scatter. Because they overwhelm their people, if you the king were to go and attack them, who would be a match for you? Therefore, it is said that the benevolent man has no match. I beg of you not to have any doubts of it, your majesty.'

Here, as in Deng Xiaoping's writings, we see a link drawn between morality and security. Cultivation of *ren* by the ruler of the state leads to a "trickle-down righteousness" whereby the people come to embody the same righteousness as the ruler. This societal righteousness produces a stable domestic order, which allows the ruler to mobilize the people militarily to achieve his security goals. This is not an isolated reference in Mencius. The concept of *ren* is repeatedly connected to security, even being framed as a sufficient condition for ruling everything under heaven (*tianxia* 天下). Like *rencai* in Deng's thinking, *ren* can be found in most people but must be actively cultivated.

It seems very clear from this juxtaposition that *rencai* as it appears in Deng Xiaoping's strategic cultural discourse is a Confucian-inspired concept. Although not explicitly inflected in Confucian terms (likely because of the volatile political climate and antagonism towards traditional culture during Deng's time), its general semantic contours are the same. The moral man presented as the lynchpin of state security in both.

This raises the question of whether this has always been the case. If Confucian units of meaning appear in Chinese strategic culture under Deng Xiaoping, even occupying a similar position conceptually as the key to effective military mobilization, then one could argue that Confucianism has held constant as an important influence in Chinese political culture from the Warring States period through the Imperial era and Communist revolution into the present. Although this argument need not assert that Confucianism was the only conceptual framework at play, just demonstrating that it never disappeared would support the idea that Confucianism is essential to Chinese culture, consistent with a monolithic, static view of Chinese strategic culture.

However, if we look to modern China's other great military and political leader Mao Zedong, we see an important difference. The moral man is conspicuously absent from Mao's writings on military strategy and foreign policy. While Mao does talk at length about the importance of training and the cultivation of military skill, his focus is not on the moral dimension of training. This is not to say Mao's depiction of national security is completely amoral. His discussions of training are all tinged with a distinct moral flavor. However, unlike the morality of Mencius and Deng, Mao's sense of right and wrong is not situated in the individual but in the political movement as a whole. This can be seen in his discussions of political training of cadres in *Basic Tactics* or 《基本战略》:

"In order to assure that all the independent actions of a guerrilla unit achieve complete victory, aside from bolstering military training, the most important thing is that we must make certain that the officers and soldiers have a high level of 'political consciousness' and 'devotion' to their cause. Political training is the only method by which this objective can be achieved."

And again later on:

“We must carry out political instruction directed toward the resurrection of our people (stimulate the soldiers' national consciousness, their patriotism, and their love for the people and the masses) and ensure that every officer and soldier in a unit understands not only the tasks for which he is responsible but also the necessity of fighting in defense of our state. We must also pay attention to supporting the leaders, to maintaining the unit's solidarity with genuine sincerity, to carrying out and completing the orders of one's superiors, and to maintaining an iron military discipline. We must see that the multitude of the soldiers are of one mind and equipped with both the resolve and the will to save our country together. Apart from strengthening its own fighting capacity, a unit must also carry out propaganda among the masses regarding the plots of the invaders and of the enemy.”

Although there is a sense of righteousness that Mao thinks should be instilled in the troops, its focus is not on the good character of individuals. Instead, it is a morality derived from class struggle. Its cultivation is framed in terms of national consciousness, patriotism and devotion to the cause. Nowhere is there a sense of the primacy of individual's good character or the implication that the state's security will fall into place if that individual morality is cultivated.

The history of this symbol of the moral man shows a specific instance of diachronic change in Chinese strategic culture. The moral man was an element central to traditional Confucian conceptions of security and interstate relations during the Imperial era. However, this element disappears during Mao's tenure, replaced by a class-based sense of morality drawn from Marxist-Leninist thought and situated in the collective rather than the individual. This class-based conception of national security fades after Mao dies, and under Deng Xiaoping the notion of the moral man reemerges, but now framed using different vocabulary that disguises its Confucian roots. The disappearance and subsequent reappearance of the

moral man in Chinese security-related semiotic practices illustrates the mutability we expect if we take an integrated view of strategic culture that includes symbolic discourses in a system of meaning-making.

Synchronically, this concept of the moral man as the lynchpin of national security reorients our understanding of Chinese foreign policy under Deng Xiaoping. Johnston's claim that China has been characterized by culturally enabled *realpolitik* thinking for centuries no longer seems sensible. Instead, we see a picture of Deng's strategic thought and policy as focused on defensive capabilities supported and guided by an innate moral compass cultivated at every level of the political process, aspects only captured by an approach that focuses on culture's constitutive content. But instead of encouraging us to treat China as defensively oriented in its essence, arriving at this understanding through a dynamic theory of strategic culture prompts us to turn our gaze forward with a sensitivity to how these discourses shift and change the realm of political possibility.

Conclusion

In this paper I have contributed to the literature on Chinese strategic culture by refuting the notion that Chinese strategic thought must either be essentially Confucian or not Confucian at all. Specifically, I have joined Liu Tiewa in responding to Alastair Iain Johnston's assertion that China has a *realpolitik* strategic culture that has endured for centuries. Answering Liu's call for an integrated view of strategic culture that accommodates changes over time, I have drawn from linguistic anthropology to understand strategic culture as a system of meaning-making practices. This system mediates policymakers' formulation and

articulation of policies and has the capacity to change over time. This provides a theoretical grounding for the changes Liu Tiewa observed empirically but did not frame within any larger theory.

I developed predicate analysis as the ideal methodology for examining strategic culture from the vantage point of semiotic practices. By looking at the the characteristics assigned to objects in the text rather than just the relationships between objects, this method gives us greater insight into the constitutive content of strategic culture without sacrificing our understanding of the causal content. I then applied this methodology to Deng Xiaoping's writings on military strategy and foreign policy. The analysis presents a nuanced picture of Chinese strategic thought that is more in line with Liu's view than Johnston's. Though there are *realpolitik* elements present, there is an overall orientation of defensive restraint. In particular, I looked at the concept of the moral man (*rencai* 人才), the lynchpin in Deng's conception of security. Tracing this clearly Confucian-inspired concept diachronically shows that Confucianism's role is far from static.

The conception of strategic culture presented here does not fit neatly into the typology presented by John Glenn (2009). Although I have very self-consciously drawn from both Poststructuralist and Interpretivist ideas on strategic culture, I have also sought to align my study with Glenn's presentation of Constructivist strategic culture scholarship in that I am sensitive to the desire for general applicability. My model of strategic culture can easily be applied to other states, using the same methodologies to investigate the contours of other strategic cultures. Synchronically, the focus could be on finding common strategic vocabularies cross-culturally. Diachronically, there may be other identifiable discursive acts like securitization that modify the cognitive space of politics.

But the ultimate goal of applying the lens of strategic culture to China is to understand the implications of China's rapid rise for global security. This study shows that there are stark limits on what the past can tell us about the present and future of Chinese foreign policy. An analysis of the past can show us what the discourses were, but assuming they stay constant is dangerous. If we look to Mao's era to explain Chinese behavior today, we would be blind to the Confucian elements that reemerged under Deng Xiaoping. Looking backward while moving forward, we may very easily fall into the trap of essentializing Chinese culture in a reductive, even Orientalist way.

The integrated view of strategic culture as meaning-making provides a way out of the trap. Instead of only looking into the past, we can look to the present as well. Culture—of the strategic variety and otherwise—is not a black box that can only be understood in retrospect. It is an ongoing activity performed by living, breathing humans. The methodology of predicate analysis need not only be applied to yellowed historical texts. By looking at an ongoing discourse such as Xi Jinping's speeches on Sino-Japanese relations we can see the meanings attached to China's policy actions. These meanings are the key to understanding the intentionality behind the policies. It is this intentionality that ultimately answers the question "What does the rise of China mean?".

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Figures & Diagrams

Figure 1:

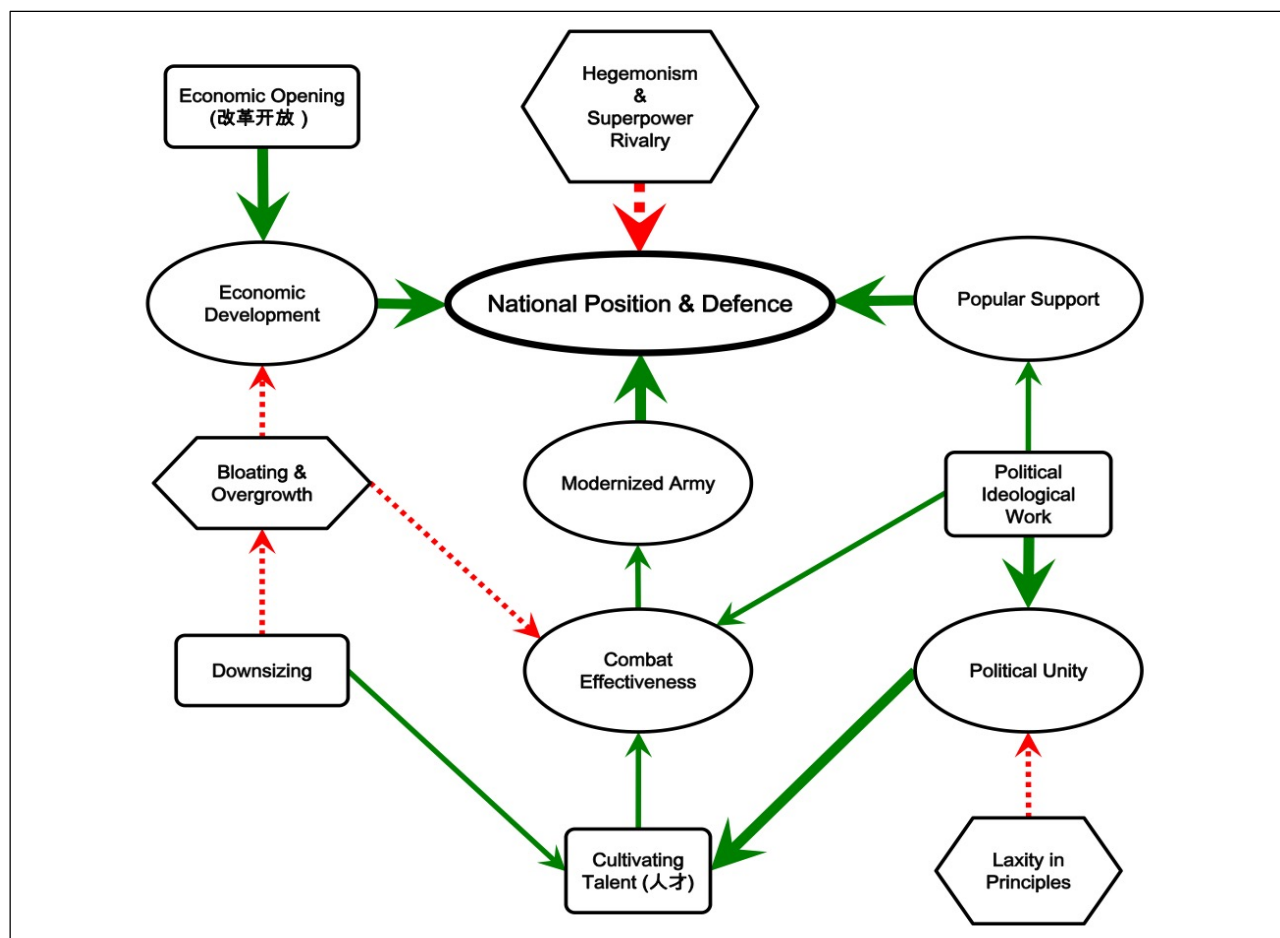


Figure 1: Schematic Representation of Dengist Strategic Culture